
Tom Swift And His Magnetic Silencer

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CHAPTER I. A PREMATURE EXPLOSION

Had something happened to Tom Swift?

His chum Ned Newton was uneasy over the young inventor's prolonged absence. Partly to satisfy his own feelings as well as to take care of an important caller at the offices of the Swift Construction Company, Ned phoned several places to try to locate Tom. He had no luck.

"I'm doing my best, Mr. Gonzo," he said to the impatient gentleman who was waiting.

"But it is mos' urgent that I see Monsieur Swif' at once!" Pedro Gonzo paced nervously about the office. "My government commands haste!"

Ned in his anxiety found it hard to be very much impressed at this moment by the man's statement. Tom Swift had been gone for hours to test his latest experiment with a secret bomb. He had told his chum very little about it, but this was not unusual. He rarely mentioned details until he had reached perfection.

"I wish to place a mos' important order," muttered Pedro Gonzo sulkily, looking at his watch. "I mus' catch my train soon."

"I'm sorry," said Ned, rising to bid the caller good-bye. "To tell you the truth, I'm worried about Tom Swift. He should have been here hours ago."

There was good cause for worry, for at that moment the youthful inventor was in the midst of a hazardous adventure. With him was an older man who was a friend of long standing. Mr. Damon was eccentric and amusing, but loyal to Tom. He loved to be with the brilliant young man. Often he sought him out to get away from his wife who always wanted him to go to parties.

"Bless my potato patch," exclaimed the stout, middle-aged gentlemen as he turned his car into the driveway of a neat-looking farm. "Tom Swift, I never heard of such a thing!"

"Well, Mr. Damon, I hope no one else has, either," dryly commented the younger man beside him. "It

wouldn't be much of an invention it was common knowledge!"

"But to think! Planting a field with a bomb!" Mr. Damon shook his head. "You'll have to show me!"

"And I will. If you'll just drive over to the ground you had plowed this morning, we'll see what my controlled bomb-planter will do."

"It's not far," said the eccentric man. "I told Rumble, my caretaker, to work down by the creek."

He turned into a narrow dirt road that led from the big barn near the farmhouse. In a few minutes they saw the little stream meandering along but the spot was still filled with cornstubble from last year's harvest.

"Is that the field?" asked Tom. "Nobody has plowed it."

"That Rumble!" exclaimed Mr. Damon angrily. "See, he has had the wrong one plowed; the one on the hillside there. Now you'll have to postpone your test!"

"That's all right, Mr. Damon," interrupted the inventor, smiling. "It will just be a harder test, which is all the better. If my controlled bomb will work on a hillside which is one of its features, I hope-it will certainly work on the level."

A few minutes later Tom was kneeling over a peculiar, cone shaped device which he had taken from the car and placed on the ground about halfway up the hill. Mr. Damon looked on with great interest, muttering numerous "blessings," as Tom carefully turned a thumbscrew set in the gleaming cylinder. As he made the adjustments he constantly consulted the dial of a small instrument connected to the bomb by wires.

"That seems about right," he said finally, as he disconnected the meter. "I had to guess at the angle of the field, though. If I had known that we would have to use a slanting piece of ground I'd have brought a surveyor's transit."

"But, Tom," objected his old friend, "farmers aren't likely to know how to use such things. I don't believe your invention is practical!"

"This is just an experimental model. When I put it on the market it will be made to adjust itself automatically," explained the young scientist, pushing his device into the soft ground. Then he flipped over a tiny lever and jumped up quickly

"All set, Mr. Damon!" he cried, walking rapidly toward the automobile. "Come on, we must drive away from here. The bomb is set to explode in two minutes!"

The stout man scrambled to the wheel and tramped on the starter. The motor whirred but failed to start. Again and again he tried but to no avail.

"She won't go Tom!" he gasped.

"Small wonder. Look at your gas gauge. Empty!" Tom grasped his friend by the arm and unceremoniously tumbled him out of the machine.

"Let's crouch back of the car!" proposed Mr. Damon hoarsely.

“Can't do that. The blast may tumble it over! We'll have to run!”

The two started away as fast as possible over the newly-turned furrows. Then a hissing warned Tom. Something had gone wrong and the bomb was going off ahead of time.

“Down, Mr. Damon!” shouted the inventor, throwing himself flat. “Get down!”

An instant later a loud explosion sounded and a hail of missiles filled the air.

“Oh, oh!” cried Mr. Damon.

In the meantime Ned Newton had started out after his chum. Finally through Mrs. Damon he had learned that her husband had gone off “galavanting” with Tom Swift into the country.

“Probably they went to Mr. Damon's new farm,” Ned said to himself, as he closed his desk. “Anyway I'll try that place first.”

The young business manager of the great Swift Construction Company left his office by the side door, near which he had parked his car. As he drove toward the gate he noted with approval the appearance of activity and development everywhere visible.

The farm Mr. Damon had purchased was somewhere off the road between Mansburg and Shopton, the small town where the Swift plant was located. Ned had never been there.

“I hope I shan't have any trouble finding it,” he said to himself as he passed the outskirts of the city. “Anyhow, I can always inquire if necessary.”

This he presently did, but his informant—a young farmhand he stopped to question—must have given him wrong directions for presently young Newton found himself on a little-used road that grew progressively rougher.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, as his car hit a particularly deep rut. “This can't be the right way. Nobody would ever use this road! But it must lead somewhere for there's a car coming along behind.”

“It's that old yellow sedan that was parked near the works,” he muttered. “I wonder—is it following me?”

To test this Ned increased his speed considerably in spite of the poor condition of the old road. As he went jolting along he kept a watch in the mirror and soon saw that the driver of the other car had fed more gas to his machine also. Instead of being left behind, it now was somewhat closer than before. Tom Swift's chum could see that there were at least two persons in the auto, a man and a woman in the front seat.

“They're following me, all right. Maybe it's a hold-up plot!”

Ned looked around but there were no houses nearby nor did he see any farmers working in the fields. Ahead about a half mile grew a clump of trees and the road curved there. Thinking rapidly, the youth made a plan.

CHAPTER II. A LOST WALLET

Ned put on more speed and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the yellow car drop back. As soon as he came within the stretch of woodland and was hidden from view around the curve, he stopped quickly. Then he turned his machine around, headed back the way he had come, and waited.

“I hope this will work,” he thought with rapidly beating heart.

His plan succeeded. The pursuing auto was just entering the woods as he shot out and passed it. He got a good look at the two passengers within it, however. At the wheel sat a swarthy, forbidding sort of man. He had no hat on and Ned could see his close-cropped, bristling black hair. His companion was a hard-faced blonde woman who stared boldly at the youth.

Ned wondered if he imagined it, but he thought he heard the driver say, “That's not Tom Swift!”

The young man sped down the road but the other car did not follow. On and on he went until he reached the main high-way again. This time he made no mistake in his direction to the Damon farm. Presently the buildings loomed up but Ned could see no activity at the house or near the barn.

“Guess Tom isn't here,” he thought, discouraged.

Then suddenly he spied two men in a field. The older one, who was being dragged out of a car, began to wave his arms wildly. The younger fellow pulled him along frantically.

“Why, that's Tom Swift,” cried Ned aloud. “And Mr. Damon is with him! But they're acting strangely. I wonder why they're running?”

Then he heard an explosion and saw a column of smoke and dirt fly up. The two hurrying figures seemed to stumble and fall.

“Great Caesar, an accident!” he cried. “Tom's hurt! Maybe he's-” Fear clutched at Ned's heart.

He stepped heavily on the accelerator and his roadster leaped ahead. Reaching the field he slammed on the brakes and jumped out to race across to the side of his friends.

“Tom! Tom!” he called. “Are you badly hurt?”

“Oh, Ned!” The inventor sat up and wiped some soil from his face. “No, I'm not hurt. But it is merely a matter of good luck I wasn't. It's all over, Mr. Damon. You can get up.”

The stout gentleman grunted and sat upright, a comical sight. His face, what little was showing through a coating of dirt, was red and he was breathing heavily.

“I came very near smothering!” he complained. “Bless my oxygen tank, but this is scientific farming with a vengeance!”

“What in the world have been doing, Tom?” asked Ned.

“Well, one thing,” grinned his chum, “creating business for the dry cleaners. Look at our suits. But seriously, I have been trying out a new agricultural gadget. How it performed remains to be seen.”

He started walking briskly toward the scene of the explosion, hoping fervently that the new invention

would prove successful. It would have so many uses in aiding the work of farmers. Now as he passed Mr. Damon's car he saw with satisfaction that it did not appear to be damaged. It was covered with the rich, dark soil and bespeckled with little yellow objects.

“Kernels of corn!” exclaimed Ned, picking up one of these. “Have you invented a way to make corn explode?”

“No, not at all,” replied Tom. “My plan is to plant any kind of seeds by means of what I've called a 'controlled bomb.' It's somewhat complicated to describe but simple enough in principle. What I'm eager to see right now is whether or not it distributed the grain evenly. If it didn't, the idea is worthless.”

But, as old readers know, when Tom Swift got a new idea it generally proved to be a good one. He soon found that his controlled bomb was no exception. To his delight he saw that the kernels had been hurled evenly over the entire half-acre field. They had fallen with sufficient spaces between them to insure a uniform growth of corn stalks.

“Tom, this is great!” exclaimed Ned Newton, thinking of fat profits for the company “I can almost forgive you for the fright you gave me.”

“I'm sorry about that, Ned. Of course I didn't know you were coming here. What did bring you?”

“I was worried about you, but never would have known where you were if I hadn't phoned all over to locate you. Mrs. Damon finally told me.”

“Did my wife sound uh-peeved?” asked Mr. Damon anxiously.

“To put it mildly, she did.” grinned Ned. “But Tom, there was a foreigner, Pedro Gonzo he calls himself, at the office to see you. He's an excitable person who wanted to give you a large order. He wouldn't wait.”

“Pedro Gonzo? Never heard the name before. Who is he? And what did he want to see me about?”

“He says he's a Ruthenian and his papers from their embassy seem all right. What he wanted I don't know but I gathered he is acting for the government of Ruthenia. He said his country is in a great hurry to get in touch with you.”

“That's very interesting. I wonder what he wanted,” mused Tom. “Well, I'm pretty busy but I'll have a talk with him next time he comes. There's no more to do here, so we may as well start back.”

“I'm afraid I'll have to ride in Ned's car,” said Mr. Damon. “How I forgot to put gasoline in my machine I'll never know!”

At this the two young men exchanged smiles. Mr. Damon's absence of mind seemed to be well known to everyone but him-self.

“You don't want to leave your car in the field all night,” said Ned. “I'll drain some gas from my tank and put it in yours, if you can find a container of some kind.”

“Bless my spark plugs!” cried the eccentric man. “That's a good idea. I'll walk up to the farmhouse and get a can.”

“Ned, let's knock off some of this mud,” proposed Tom, picking up a stick and beginning to scrape the windshield of Mr. Damon's auto.

“All right,” said Ned, “and while we work tell me more about your controlled bomb-planter.”

“It's quite simple,” replied young Swift. “I take a conical container of very light metal and put the grain to be planted in concentric chambers around the charge of explosive in the center. These chambers are weaker the farther they are from the center. This allows the seeds in the outer ones to be shot to a greater distance than those within.”

“It doesn't sound simple to me,” said Ned. “But it's wonderful.”

“Arranged a little differently,” went on Tom, “a charge of insect killer can be substituted for seeds and one or two bombs would be able to spray a large orchard.”

“There's another kind of use, too!” exclaimed Ned, stopping in his efforts to remove the mud as a thought struck him. “Shrapnel! Put bullets instead of seeds in your invention. Use a heavy charge of explosive and you could spray a whole regiment of soldiers! In these warlike days we could make a lot of money!”

“I don't doubt it,” was Tom's answer. “But I'm not interested in money made that way, no matter how much it might be. Scientific developments have already been misused too often by war-crazy men! They'll never kill men with my ideas!”

“You're right, Tom,” said Ned soberly. “But if America is ever attacked, it would be a good thing to have ready.”

“Oh, that's a different matter entirely. I can tell you, in confidence, that I plan to give the War Department full details of the new bomb when I get it perfected. But for myself I will work only on its peaceful applications. Here comes Mr. Damon.”

“Bless my barnyard,” grumbled the stout man as he walked up. “You know that caretaker of mine isn't anywhere to be found? He ought to stay here and tend to business. That's what I pay him for!”

“Who is he?” asked Tom, as Ned prepared to fill the can Mr. Damon had brought. “I mean, how did you come to hire such a shiftless fellow?”

“I didn't know he was like that. He answered an ad I put in the paper. He seemed eager to work and talked well about farming so I gave him the job.”

“Did you check his references?” asked Ned.

“He had none. He said he used to have his own farm but lost it for taxes.”

“I'd check up on his story, if I were you,” advised Tom. “Now Ned and I must get back to the plant. I want to see if a shipment of ore I'm expecting has come. That amount of gasoline ought to take you to a filling station. We'll see you later.”

“All right, boys, and thank you. Tom, you and I will show my wife a thing or two. She didn't want me to buy this place said I couldn't make a success of it. But I'll show her. Why, we planted a whole field of corn in a few seconds!” Mr. Damon seemed in high good humor as he got into his muddy car and drove

off.

“I hope he doesn't forget to stop at a gas station,” murmured Ned as he and Tom got into his roadster. “But he's right in thinking so well of your bomb-planter. We must get the patents through quickly.”

“I'll have the plans ready for the legal department in a few days,” promised Tom. “In the meantime, Mr. Damon's farm will make a excellent place for further tests.”

“What about that ore shipment you spoke of?” questioned Ned. “You have another project in mind?”

“Well, I have something new in mind,” confessed Tom. “But until I get this metal from the West I can't tell you much about it.”

When the chums reached the Swift Construction Company they went directly to Tom's private building. Here he had his office, laboratory and small apartment fitted up, where he frequently spent the night when he worked late. Quickly he changed into another suit, for the one he had worn was covered with dirt. As he finished, the phone rang.

“Hello!” he spoke into the instrument. “Yes, this is Tom Swift.” He listened for a minute, then said, “Oh, that's too bad. A lot, you say? I'll see about it. Glad to help you all I can. Good-bye.”

“Anything wrong?” asked Ned.

“It was Mr. Damon,” replied the inventor. “He got home without any trouble but when he started to change his clothes he found his wallet was gone. It contained a good deal of money, so he is pretty upset. In it, too, was a paper I had asked him to hold. On the sheet were some notes about the new bomb. I hate to have that get into any stranger's hands.”

CHAPTER III. A STRANGE GIFT

“I'm sorry to hear of the loss,” said Ned. “Let's hope Mr. Damon will find the wallet.”

“I'm going to have a look myself,” replied Tom with determination.

“When will you do that?” demanded Ned. “You know how busy you are.”

“Oh, I'll find time. Maybe I'll run out to the farm tonight. No doubt he dropped the case there. But come on, I'm eager to see if my ore has arrived. On the way I can check up on things in general.”

As they left the building, the young inventor gave a peculiar whistle. At once his giant servant Koku came running up. Eight feet tall and big in proportion, the man was devoted to the Swifts. It was his particular work to guard the laboratory from all intruders. On more than one occasion his loyalty and enormous strength had served Tom well.

“Master call?” the fellow said in a deep voice, looking around.

“Yes, Koku. I may have something heavy for you to carry.”

“Me can do!” declared the giant, flexing his mighty arms. “Nothin' too much.”

As the three started down the concrete walk the youthful scientist realized there were several things for him to attend to. In addition to the experiments going on in many departments of the company, a great deal of manufacturing was being done. All of the things of course were inventions of Tom or his father, Barton Swift. The latter now was an old man and no longer active in the affairs of the plant. Still he continued the researches that had put him in the front rank of American inventors.

After Tom had straightened out a few problems in the big electrical shop and had satisfied himself that work on the massive electric furnace was going along all right, he felt that he now was ready for his conference with the chief chemist.

“But I believe I'll put that off until tomorrow,” he declared to Ned. “If the ore is here I want to get it in the smelter and start refining it this afternoon.”

As the chums approached the big warehouse near the main gate they saw an express truck just backing up to the loading platform. “Perhaps that's your stuff.” suggested Ned.

“Maybe so,” said Tom, walking along more rapidly. “Hurry up, Koku.”

Inside the body of the truck the expressman and his helper were struggling with a small crate which seemed to be enormously heavy for its small size.

“Where is that box from?” called Tom.

“It's marked Denver, Mr. Swift,” said the man, wiping perspiration from his face. “It feels as if there were a couple of anvils inside!”

“Take it, Koku,” directed Tom. “This is what I've been expecting.”

With some difficulty the two in the truck had moved the crate to the back of the vehicle. Now Koku reached over the tailboard with his long arms and picked up the box without apparent strain. As the men stared in amazement the giant shouldered the heavy load and turned to Tom.

“Where you want um, Master?” he asked.

“In my laboratory, Koku.”

“I wish I had him to help me,” muttered the expressman, watching the ease with which the huge man bore the package away.

As soon as Tom got back to the laboratory he told the giant to open the crate. Inside were several strong canvas sacks which held the ore, a mass of lumpy gray rocks speckled with streaks of glittering color. This was dumped into the hopper of a powerful crushing machine.

“Thanks, Koku. I won't need you any longer,” said Tom, starting the mechanism which at once began chewing the ore into a fine powder.

“Me be right outside if you need um,” boomed the giant, as he left.

While the rocks were being pulverized the inventor turned on the heat in the small smelting furnace. This apparatus was entirely electrical, being fired by the current in a novel manner recently invented by Tom Swift. It was this development that had made possible the wonderful electric furnace which he was

building on special order from the biggest steel mill in the whole country.

“What's this all about, anyway?” demanded Ned, glancing at his watch. “This isn't going to take very long, is it?”

“You'll know soon enough,” replied his chum, busy weighing out various chemicals. One by one he put them in an iron crucible inside the smelter which was warming up fast. “Have you an engagement? You seem very anxious about something.”

“Me? No, I'm not worried but you're acting so mysterious-”

“Well, Ned, to tell you the truth I can't give you the dope on my new idea yet. I don't mean to be mysterious, as you call it, but until I make these experiments I won't know myself whether or not there is anything to it.”

As he finished speaking a whirring noise came from the crusher. Tom hurried over and turned off the motor. The powdered ore had fallen through the trap in the bottom and now was collected in a steel bin. Some of this the young inventor weighed out. Then, after putting on a pair of heavy gloves for safety he added this to the chemicals in the crucible. Next he stirred the contents together thoroughly with an iron rod, shoved the container well back into the furnace and closed the door.

“That's that,” he announced, turning up the heat-control lever. “She'll cook along all night and sometime tomorrow ought to be ready.”

“You sound as if you were baking a cake,” grumbled his business manager. “I hope it turns out well. You know how much that electric thing costs to run!”

“You old fuss-budget!” laughed Tom. “Electric heat is far the best. It's clean and easy to control. With my new method you can really get up some heat!”

“Maybe so. But what bothers me is how much it costs.”

“Never mind the details!” Tom playfully pounded his chum on the back. “That's what I keep you around for, to do my worrying!”

The two left the laboratory, walking down the corridor to the inventor's office. As Tom looked toward his desk he noticed a package on it.

“Hello!” he exclaimed. “Wonder what that is? It wasn't here when we left a little while ago.”

“And it shouldn't be here,” declared Ned. “There's a strict rule against any deliveries in this building!”

“I'll ask Koku,” decided Tom. “Maybe he brought it.” Going to the door, he called his servant.

“No, Master,” said the giant, as he hurried forward. “Me no put um thing there. Never see um before!”

“Were any strangers around here today?” asked the inventor. “Or did you see anyone come in here with a package like this?”

“Nobody come 'cept your fadder. And he no have um box. Doors locked all day. But I been 'way with you just now.”

Suddenly Tom laughed. He had just noticed a dimly penciled message on the brown wrapping.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said. “I had forgotten completely. This is a special occasion. It says on here, 'Happy Birthday to Tom Swift!’”

“Who signed the greeting?” asked Ned.

“There isn't any signature.”

At that instant both boys noticed a peculiar sound which certainly was coming from the inside of the package.

“Do you hear that?” exclaimed Ned. “That's ticking. It's a bomb! Quick let's get out of here before we're killed!”

CHAPTER IV. TOM REFUSES A MILLION

“Hurry, Tom,” Ned urged in alarm as his chum stared in horror at the package. “It's a time bomb-may explode any second!”

Tom Swift knew that this might well be the case. Through his mind flashed thoughts of the many evil plotters who had sought to do him harm in the past. He knew he should run, yet an exploding bomb would mean the destruction of his laboratory and the valuable papers in the building-a very serious loss. He made his decision.

“Ned, you and Koku get out of here!” he ordered sharply, at the same moment picking up the box quickly but as gently as possible.

Without pausing to explain, he rushed out of the office, down the corridor and into his laboratory. There he threw the ticking bundle into a tub of oil standing beside the electric furnace.

He could do no more and now turned to hurry back through the corridor. There were Ned and Koku, who had come running after him.

“Whoo!” he bellowed. “What wrong Master?”

“Hurry, Tom!” pleaded Ned Newton frantically. “For goodness' sake, let's get out of here!”

There came a loud pounding on the outer door of the building and a voice was heard calling:

“Massa Tom! What's de matter in dere? Lemme in!”

Tom strode to the door, Ned and the giant hurrying after him. He flung it open. On the steps stood an old, white-haired colored man.

“Rad!” exclaimed the inventor. “What are you doing here? But run, we must get away from this place!”

“Yes, and make it snappy!” urged Ned. “We found a bomb on Tom's desk!”

“Dat's funny,” mumbled Eradicate Sampson, who was a servant in the Swift home. “Dey sho wuzn't nuthin' on de desk when I went in dere a little while back.”

“Wait a minute!” Tom Swift stopped and stared at the honest, black face of his aged retainer. “Do you mean to say YOU were in my office this afternoon?”

“Sholy!” beamed Rad, “I fetched yo' a birfday gif I wanted t' git ahead ob dat triflin' giant Koku an' I done done it! How yo' like de 'larm- clock, Massa Tom? I knowed yo' needed a new one.”

“Whew!” burst the young business manager, clutching at a post. “Hold me up, someone! Of all the-” He stood there, shaking his head in breathless fashion.

“Hey, whut's gwine on heah?” demanded Eradicate. “Ain't yo' gwine run fum de bumb no mo'?”

“YOU put the 'bomb' on my desk, Rad!” accused the inventor, smiling broadly, for he no longer feared a destructive blast. “Thank you very much for remembering my birthday, but your gift certainly lived up to its name-it ALARMED us enough! You see, when we heard the ticking noise, we thought it was an infernal machine.”

“I'se suttinly sorry dat it skeered yo' all. I speck I shouldn't have woun' de clock up. But I'se glad it wuzn't a sho-nuff bumb. When I heerd de hollerin' in de buildin' and de way dat Koku was a-carryin' on, I wuz feerd dat sumfin wuz mighty much wrong.”

“How did you manage to get into the office?” demanded Ned.

“Ole Massa Swift lemme have de key when I 'splained whut I aimed t' do,” chuckled the darky. “I sho put one over on yo', Koku!”

The big man merely grunted, for he could not think of any suitable reply. He and the old Negro were striving constantly to outdo each other in Tom's service. Beneath this spirit of rivalry the two were fast friends, as they had been ever since the inventor had brought the giant back from South American wilds.

When Tom Swift reached his office early the next morning he found a telegram awaiting him. It was from Pedro Gonzo and stated that the Ruthenian was returning to Shopton and asked an interview. As the young scientist planned to be there all morning he wired for the man to come ahead.

“Seems money is no object to this fellow,” commented Ned, reading over the message. “Says he's chartering a special plane for the trip from Washington. I wonder what he can want?”

“Whatever it is, he's in a hurry,” was Tom's opinion. “Now, old boy, if you'll get those new contracts in order, I'll look them over. While you fix 'em up, I'll step into the lab and see how my smelting operation is coming along.”

It took him twenty minutes to inspect the contents of his ore crucible through the quartz observation window in the wall of the electric furnace. Then he returned to his office to plunge into the mass of documents on his desk. This took so much time that he was still at it when Koku came to announce the arrival of a visitor.

“Must be Gonzo,” observed the inventor. “All right, Koku. Please ask him to come in.”

“Ah, Monsieur Swif!” cried the excited Ruthenian a moment later. He rushed in to shake Tom's hand

warmly. To Ned he bowed stiffly. "Zis is ze great honaire for me- to meet ze so great inventaire! I have great proposition for you"—he glanced at Ned- "but we mus' talk in private, no?"

"No," replied Tom calmly. He had dealt with excited men before. "If you have any proposal to make, you can make it before my business manager."

"Very well," Gonzo shrugged. "Now, to ze point! You know ze conditions today, yes? War, war, war! But, so far, Ruthenia is at peace. But who can see ze future? My government- he has heard of your great genius- commissions you to invent for us ze noiseless airplane! One zat can swoop over ze enemy wiz no sound to betray it. You must start immediate! Ruthenia will pay you well. Now, what say you to zat, Monsieur Swif?"

"Well, Mr. Gonzo, while I do wish to disappoint you and your government, I cannot undertake your commission. I am sorry."

"Ah! You Americaines!" The Ruthenian wag-ged his finger in what he considered a playful manner. "Always you drive ze good bargain! Come, we will not haggle- I am authorized to offer you one million dollaires!" He drew from his coat a folded document and laid it on the desk with a flourish. "Sign that and the instant you succeed we pay you ze million plus a sum to cover all experimental costs!"

"Sorry," repeated Tom Swift, shaking his head firmly, "I cannot do what you ask."

"But, Tom!" protested Ned. "A million-"

"It's out of the question." The inventor stood up and held out his hand to Gonzo. "Your offer is a very generous one, sir, and I regret that we-"

"Bah!" The Ruthenian's face darkened with anger and he ignored the proffered handshake. "You, Swif, you weel regret zis! Hah, zere are other inventaires! Zere is one who even now has almos' solve' ze problem! I go to heem!"

Without further words the Ruthenian representative hurried from the office.

"Well, there goes prosperity," observed Ned, regarding his chum somewhat darkly. He hated to see a chance at an immense profit get away from the company. "What in the world made you act in such haste, anyway? Why, you didn't even listen to the details of Gonzo's proposition!"

"It would have been a waste of time. I may as well tell you that a high-ranking U. S. Army officer approached me about this very problem not so long ago. You know it goes without saying that anything I can work out in a matter of this sort goes to our own government, not to some foreign country."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Ned. "Now I understand. But at the time it seemed to me you were just coolly tossing away a million dollars!"

"You seem pretty sure I could earn all those dollars!" Tom stared at the office wall. "I don't quite like what Gonzo hinted about another inventor being so close to success."

"Why? Do you think anyone else has a chance?"

"Put it down to professional jealousy!" Tom laughed shortly. "Actually, I want to be sure that Uncle Sam gets the invention. This other inventor may sell his plans to Ruthenia."

“I don't see how anyone can build a soundless airplane,” remarked Ned dubiously. “Even yourself, Tom Swift! Even now, a pilot can't be heard if he cuts his engine and glides toward his target-”

“That wouldn't work all the time,” interrupted Tom, “because airplane engines must be 'gunned' frequently; they'll choke and stall otherwise. Such sudden blasts of power would be detected quickly by the enemy's audio locators. There are many experimenters working on this problem but I believe they are attacking it from the wrong angle. Even if an absolutely silent motor can be made—which is doubtful—there remains the propeller noise. In a high speed plane this is much louder than the engine roar.”

“What do you propose to do?” asked Ned. “I fail to see how even you can make a whirring propeller blade noiseless.”

“It all depends on the-” Tom stopped suddenly, holding up his hand. A loud hissing sound was coming from the laboratory down the hall.

“It's the furnace. My new metal!” he exclaimed, jumping up and rushing from the office.

CHAPTER V. A SURPRISE

Tom Swift hurried across his laboratory to the electric furnace and peered through the quartz-glass observation window. The metal within was glowing redly. Over its molten surface greenish wisps of flame were dancing.

“How is it coming?” asked Ned, pausing in the doorway to watch his chum pull over a lever and open a valve a trifle more.

“Just as I had hoped!” called Tom, raising his voice above the clanking of a pump. “I'm putting a higher vacuum on the heating chamber.”

After some further adjustments, he seemed quite satisfied with the progress being made.

“Where did you get the ore?” questioned Ned.

“You haven't forgotten our trip out West last year, have you?” the young inventor asked, after the two had returned to Tom's office.

“No, indeed!” smiled his friend. “I had a great time! But it was a funny sort of vacation for you, spending all your time hunting up old rocks to analyze.”

“You know the old saying: a change of work is often the best kind of rest. Anyway, I discovered something out there which may prove to be of great importance; a new metallic ore that seems to have an attraction for sound waves. It soaks 'em up, to put it crudely.”

“Say, that IS interesting!” exclaimed Ned, leaning forward in his chair. “I believe I now understand what you're trying to do. Just put some of the new stuff on an airplane and it'll attract and absorb the whir of the propeller as well as the roar of the engine! That's a great idea!”

“Well, yes, that's the basic principle,” admitted Tom. “But it's not so easy to put into practice. First the metallic salts contained in the ore must be broken down, then refined by fusing them with suitable

chemical reagents. This is a pretty tough problem. All my attempts so far have failed. But with this fresh batch of ore and my new vacuum process I believe I'll get good results this time."

"Then you'll be ready to make your sound-absorber for airplanes," said Ned.

"Speaking of that," went on Tom, opening a drawer in his desk and taking out a bundle of papers, "reminds me of some-thing you didn't know about, as you were away at the time it happened. Pedro Gonzo isn't the only Ruthenian interested in a soundless airplane. There is a strong faction in that country opposed to the government. When I say opposed, I mean they are working actively to overthrow those in power. They'll do it with violence, if necessary."

"Revolutionists, eh?" grunted Ned.

"Exactly. And you know what that term means today. I don't want anything to do with it. These people sent a man here to sound me out. From what he said I gather there must be a bunch of traitors even in the ranks of the loyalists. Long before Gonzo showed up here the Purple Shirts, as the plotters call themselves, knew what the government planned doing and tried to get ahead of them. Oh, the fellow was smooth enough but I suspected things weren't exactly as he represented them to be, so I got in touch with our own G-men to see what I could find out."

"And were your suspicions correct?"

"They were!" Tom tossed the papers he held across to his chum. "That's a confidential report, complete with maps, showing how bad the internal situation in Ruthenia is. You'll find the Ruthenians seem to like their politics rough; even mix their private family feuds and hates into 'em."

"I'll be glad to read this stuff later," said Ned, glancing over the official-looking documents.

Into his mind came the thought that the suspicious-looking people in the car which had followed him might be some of the revolutionists! Yet if he had heard correctly, the one who had mentioned Tom's name had spoken in English.

"I meant to tell you something," he said aloud to his chum and told of the incident.

"That is funny," Tom replied. "The face of the man at the wheel as you describe him reminds me of the fellow who called here representing the Purple Shirts."

"Well, watch your step," advised Ned as he turned toward one pile of letters, while Tom picked up another.

Young Swift was just smiling over an amusing birthday message from a college friend, when Ned pounded his fist on the desk.

"That electric smelting furnace is going to put us into bankruptcy!" he complained.

"What are you talking about?" Tom sounded a trifle cross. "You know we generate our own power."

"Just the same," said Ned, wagging his head, "we must buy coal to run the engines and it's being used up mighty fast these days!"

"I guess we can afford a little coal" argued Tom. "I must have juice and that's flat! After all- Great

Caesar, all the lights have gone out!”

Since the room was an air-conditioned, windowless one (for the greater safety of Tom's private papers), the failure of the current plunged the two into midnight blackness, although it was still daylight.

“There must be trouble in the power plant,” muttered the inventor— fumbling for the telephone. “I'll call up the place and find out about the shutdown.”

Just as his fingers found the instrument it began ringing. Picking up the receiver he listened for several seconds.

“That was the chief engineer,” he told Ned, after hanging up. “He claims the trouble originated HERE!”

“He must be crazy! We haven't done anything!”

“No, not in the office. But the electric furnace is-or rather, was-running. I wonder-? Guess I'll hustle over to the plant and see what's up.”

“I'll come along,” decided Ned. “I can't do anything here in the dark.”

The boys groped their way from the darkened building after Tom had crept to the switchboard in his laboratory and opened the main switch. As they started walking rapidly toward the generating plant the two noticed that no hum of machinery came from any of the shops. There seemed to be a complete breakdown.

“What's wrong here, Mr. Jackson?” cried Tom, striding into the generator room.

“Look at that, Mr. Tom!” The engineer, who had been in the Swifts' employ for years, waved toward a panel on which was a tangled mass of fused copper wires and coils. “Something you did in your lab caused such a surge of current that it melted the circuit breaker.”

“Hold on a minute!” burst out Tom. “What did you mean by saying I caused the trouble? Nothing has been turned on in my lab but the smelter!”

“Well, Mr. Tom, maybe that's the reason,” declared the engineer. “Something may have gone wrong in the furnace. At all events, our meters show the power surge went to your private laboratory.”

“Hum, I'll investigate and do it right now! Mr. Jackson, tell the men to go on home. It's about quitting time, anyway. Then you two go. I want to-”

“Oh, no, Tom Swift!” broke in Ned, winking at Mr. Jackson. “No more work for you THIS day! You come along with us.”

Before the startled youth knew what was happening, his business manager had him by one arm and the engineer by the other. Between the two grinning men he was marched out of the building and across the way toward the electrical shop.

“Hey! What are you fellows up to?” demanded Tom, struggling vainly. “Koku!” he yelled, catching sight of his giant. “These two have gone crazy. Help me!”

“No helpum!” Koku laughed loudly. “You come 'long us!” He fell in behind.

An instant later Tom knew what was afoot. As he was taken into the big shop he saw that an immense horseshoe table had been set up on the cleared floor. Around this stood all his employees.

“Happy Birthday, Tom Swift!” The mighty shout echoed through the building mingled with cheers and shrill whistles.

“Dad!” he cried, seeing his father at the curve of the table, which was laid for a banquet. “What is this? A surprise party?”

“Yes, my boy!” beamed Barton Swift. “We all want to help you celebrate. We wish you many happy returns of the day!”

“Hooray!” yelled somebody at the other end of the table.

There was an excellent dinner, and to Tom's embarrassment, after-dinner talks were given, praising the head of the company.

“This is more than I deserve,” Tom whispered to his father, who was smiling proudly.

After the clapping had died down, Mr. Jackson rapped for order. The room grew quiet and the diners leaned forward watching two men bring forward a large package. Carefully they laid it on the table directly in front of the guest of honor.

“Here, Tom Swift,” said the smiling engineer, “is a small token of our good wishes!”

In no little confusion the young inventor stood up and cut the cords, using a knife handed him by his father. Eagerly he opened the parcel. Pulling away the paper, he brought to view a large, antique clock set in a beautiful, hand-carved mahogany case.

“I-I don't quite know how to thank you men,” said Tom, looking down at the magnificent gift. “But I DO thank you! This clock will always have the place of honor in my home, you may be sure!”

Then the birthday dinner was at an end, the men crowding around to shake Tom's hand. After he had spoken to everyone, mentioning his appreciation, he and his father went home, pleased and happy.

“You'll never have any labor troubles, Tom.” said Barton Swift a little later, watching his son place the fine old clock on the library mantel. “Your employees love and respect you.”

Presently the older man bade his son good-night and went off to bed. Tom sat by the fire, thinking about the party and the other events of the day. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and jumped up.

“By George!” he cried. “I forgot all about Mr. Damon's wallet after telling him I'd look for it! I'll go to the farm right now, even though it IS late!”

Tom knew the road well, so in less than an hour he drew up near the dark, silent farmhouse.

“Guess the caretaker is sound asleep,” he muttered, getting out of his car and trying his flashlight.

He started walking briskly, it was a chilly, cloudy night with a threat of rain in the air. Nearing the field which had been planted by his controlled bomb, he was surprised to see a light flashing ahead. It

flickered on and off in an odd, furtive way, as though whoever held it was anxious not to be noticed.

“That's funny!” thought Tom, his heart beating a little faster. “I wonder-”

CHAPTER VI. A MYSTERIOUS ATTACK

“Maybe that's Mr. Damon,” he said to himself doubtfully. “But I don't believe it could be. His wife would never stand for his being out alone at this hour!”

Peering ahead, he noticed that the other searcher was now coming toward him. Tom must have been heard. Suddenly he felt his foot strike against something soft. To his surprise he found the object to be a fat wallet, evidently the one lost by Mr. Damon. As he straightened up, the leather case in his hand, a blinding light shone in his eyes. A powerful torch had been turned full upon him.

“Who are you?” demanded Tom vainly endeavoring to make out the other person's features with his own pocket flash. “Turn that light a little. I can't see a thing.”

“That's the idea,” came a rough, deep voice. “You ain't supposed to get a look at me!”

As he spoke the fellow kept coming nearer the puzzled inventor. Suddenly the figure sprang forward. Before Tom could so much as raise his arms to protect himself, the youth was dealt a terrific blow on the head with some heavy implement.

The young scientist crumbled to the ground, knocked completely unconscious by the murderous stroke. The stranger stood over his victim's body with blackjack raised, ready to strike again if need be. But his first attack had succeeded; young Swift was helpless.

Satisfied on this point, the man bent down to search Tom. In doing so he spotted the wallet, still clutched loosely in the inventor's hand. This the man rifled quickly and threw it down, a look of satisfaction on his face. As he hurried off, he glanced around uneasily, but nothing stirred, so he was sure no one had witnessed his crime.

Exactly how long Tom lay unconscious in the field the youth never knew. It must have been some little time, though, for when his senses painfully returned, a cold, fine rain was falling and his clothes were soaked through.

“Oh!” he groaned, unable for the moment to comprehend what had taken place. Why was he lying on the wet ground in the dark? He put a hand to his head, which was aching frightfully. Finally he recalled everything.

“That man!” he gasped. “Oh, my head, I must have got an awful knock!”

Tom tried to sit up but nausea overpowered him and he had to lie back, sick and dizzy. The chill rain beating on his face helped to revive him. After a time he managed to stagger to his feet.

“Got to get home,” he mumbled thickly, as he stood swaying in the cornfield. “Dark. Got to find a light!”

He could see nothing, so he dropped to his knees and commenced feeling around in the mud. Soon, to his relief, he discovered his flashlight, which proved to be undamaged. Near him lay the wallet, which he quickly picked up.

“Empty!” he muttered.

Unsteadily Tom made his way to his car. Climbing in, he slumped back of the steering wheel, sick and weak. The farmhouse was still dark. He considered going in and telephoning for help.

“No, I won't do that,” he decided. “Dad might hear about it and worry.”

The youth could not forget how near death his parent once had been brought by a heart attack and always tried to spare the older man any anxiety. Feeling a bit stronger, Tom started the engine, determined to drive himself home. He reached the main road that ran past Mr. Damon's farm without much trouble.

“Now, if I'm careful, I guess I can make it all right,” he said aloud.

But he was sicker and weaker than he realized. His machine seemed to show a fiendish desire to go in the ditch. As he straightened the car out for the dozenth time, he heard the roar of a motorcycle and the skirl of a police whistle.

“Pull up!” bawled a State Trooper, riding alongside.

Tom was glad enough to stop and did so.

“This drunken driving has got to stop!” sternly spoke the patrolman, coming up and peering into the car. “You're under arrest!”

“I haven't been drinking, Officer,” said Tom faintly. “I've been attacked-hit over the head and robbed by someone!”

“Holy Smoke!” exclaimed the policeman. “You're Tom Swift! Who did it?”

Of course the young inventor couldn't answer the question. The officer immediately put his motorcycle in a safe place and drove Tom home.

Thanks to Tom's rugged constitution, a few hours sleep nearly restored the youth to normal. He was able to go to his office as usual the next morning. He said nothing to his father about what had happened but told Ned, who was as puzzled as himself as to the reason for the prowler's presence in the field.

“Maybe he thought the pocketbook was there?” suggested Ned. “Mr. Damon may have been talking about his loss.

“No, I phoned him this morning. He has mentioned it to nobody, because he feared his wife would hear about it.

“She's bound to know now, the money being gone.”

“I made up the amount. I felt to blame because I didn't go sooner and even tonight the fellow might not have found the purse, if I hadn't accidentally stumbled on it. What worries me is the loss of that paper of mine with the notes on it.”

“Say, maybe the fellow was after the secret of your controlled bomb!” exclaimed Ned Newton.

“That's just what I'm afraid of,” said Tom. “And furthermore he may be mixed up with the Purple Shirts.”

“I see what you mean,” Ned spoke up. “The driver in that yellow car which was following me may have found out you were experimenting at the farm.”

“Exactly,” replied Tom. “Well, the police will have to take care of hunting for him. I have work to do here. I see the power is on again in this building, so I'm going to the laboratory.”

Since Tom had turned off the switch to the smelter the night before, he found the apparatus cold. When he opened the door, he saw to his surprise that the metal was coated thickly on the inside with a strange, bluish powder.

Ned was coming down the hall, his footsteps echoing loudly. As Tom moved the door, the sounds stopped. When he saw his chum standing alongside of him, he looked surprised. His business manager was talking, but the words sounded as if they were coming faintly from a great distance.

“Am I getting deaf?” wondered the inventor, thinking of the blow on his head. He closed the smelter and instantly heard normally once more. “I have it!” he cried, moving the door open and shut rapidly, while he noted the effect on the hum of a compressor running in the far corner.

“What's going on here?” demanded Ned, rubbing his ears vigorously. “My hearing is going back on me!”

“Not a bit of it, old scout!” Tom slapped his chum on the back delightedly. “Don't you see? This blue stuff-it absorbs most of the noise in here! Look!”

He opened the smelter and instantly the laboratory grew deathly still. He closed it and sounds could be heard plainly. Then, as he tried the experiment once more, no effect was produced.

“It's no good,” declared Ned in disappointment. “It will hold its power only a few moments.”

“No, I see the trouble,” said Tom, looking into the furnace. “The blue stuff has fallen off the door down into the smelter.”

Recklessly he plunged his arms inside and scooped up the powder, feeling a strange tingling sensation as he touched the stuff. After placing the precious substance in a glass jar, he attempted to brush the particles off his fingers, but found he could not do this entirely. At this moment the phone rang and he talked for several minutes over a long distance wire. Just as he finished speaking, Koku entered the laboratory. He gave one look at Tom and shrieked wildly:

“Master! Master! Um hands-they are dead!”

CHAPTER VII. TOM POISONED

Tom extended his two hands and regarded them with a curiosity not unmixed with dread. He recalled vividly what had happened to so many of those brave scientific pioneers who had first experimented with radium, before its destroying rays were understood. Some of the persons had died horrible deaths and not a few had lost arms or legs. He wondered if he stood faced with some similar fate.

“Koku! Run! Get the company doctor!” directed Ned who, although he tried not to, was thinking along much the same lines as his chum. “Tell him to hurry!”

“Me get um!” The giant rushed out frantically.

“You might have used the phone, Ned!” said Tom, smiling wanly. “But, at that, old Koku is nearly as fast as the phone!”

“I guess I forgot,” confessed Ned. “But, Tom, can't you wash that stuff off some way?”

“The powder seems to be off. My hands have changed color. And, by George, they're getting stiff! Just phone the chemistry department and ask the chief to come over, will you?” Although his expression did not alter, Tom was becoming alarmed as he tried to flex his fingers and found they could be moved only with increasing difficulty.

“Sure, sure,” murmured his business manager nervously. He made the call and commenced pacing the floor. Anxiously he gazed at his friend.

When Doctor Granville arrived, he made an examination, then called for hot water. Quickly he prepared a strong, warm solution of a drug which he took from his bag and told Tom to soak his hands.

“Doesn't seem to do much good, Doctor,” said the youth after some minutes. “The stiffness is spreading.”

Tom paused to reflect, realizing that he alone knew more about the mysterious element that was attacking him than anyone else. While he was trying to think of a suitable antidote, the chief chemist came hurrying in.

“Ah, Mr. Swift!” he cried. “Is something serious the matter? I couldn't make out from what Mr. Newton said.”

Briefly the young scientist told the man what had happened and held out his graying hands. Mr. Mawson looked very grave as he examined them.

The chemist asked Tom several questions and the two plunged into a highly technical discussion which Ned could not follow at all and the doctor only in places.

“Hum, let me see,” pondered Mr. Mawson, after the inventor had proposed his idea for a possible treatment. “Yes, it might serve, I will prepare the salve myself! You have all the ingredients here, I suppose?”

“You will find them all, with two exceptions, in the main chemical cabinet. The uranyl iodate and the hexafluoride of sulphur are both on the second shelf, over by the door.”

“How are you feeling now, Tom?” Ned asked, his face worried.

“Not very good, old man,” replied his friend, watching his chemist assemble the materials and light a Bunsen burner on the table. “The numbness is spreading to my arms. I only hope my idea works!”

“I, too, hope that,” murmured Dr. Granville, “for my knowledge cannot help you. This is a medical

mystery! Your temperature is far below normal.” Under his breath he added, “If it goes much lower, I won't answer for the consequences!”

After what seemed an endless wait to the fretting business manager, Mr. Mawson finished his work and came over with a jar of the newly-made salve, a thick, greasy-looking black cream.

“We must spread it on and wipe it off very quickly. Eh, Mr. Swift?” replied the chemist.

“Yes it's very powerful,” Tom assented weakly, hardly speaking above a whisper. “If left on too long it would cause serious burns.”

To their dismay the salve was an utter failure. As the last traces of the useless stuff were removed, the inventor collapsed in his chair unconscious.

“Mr. Barton Swift should be called at once,” said Dr. Granville in solemn tones, after the young scientist had been placed on couch in the office.

Ned had trouble controlling his voice as he gave Tom's father the sad news but he rightly felt that he was the one to make the call, for he was the young man's closest friend. Barton Swift wasted no words over the telephone but ordered his chauffeur to get him to the office in record time. A dynamic personality, he took immediate charge the instant he arrived.

“Maybe there is still time to save him!” he cried, after rapidly examining his son.

To the immense astonishment of the others he strode to the portable radio and turned on the loudest band music he could find. Then, turning the dials to maximum volume, he ordered the amazed doctor to hold Tom's hands directly over the blaring machine.

As the man turned to obey, Ned saw the chief chemist turn an inquiring glance toward Doctor Granville, who nodded significantly. The business manager felt that both men thought grief had crazed the old scientist. As to his own ideas, he was not so sure. He had never known Tom's father to do a foolish thing nor to act in an unreasonable manner.

Everyone watched the patient anxiously, Barton Swift apparently calm, the others with mixed emotions of doubt, wonder and not much hope. It was the keen, jungle-trained eyes of Koku which first detected the change.

“Master's hands!” he yelled, almost shaking the room with the power of his great lungs. “Um live again!”

He was right. The gray tinge was fading away slowly, giving place to a normal, healthy color. Soon Tom's pale face flushed and he opened his eyes.

“Why, Dad,” he said in a faint voice. “What-what are you doing here? And that radio, why is it playing so loudly?”

“You got yourself in a bad way, son,” his father replied, shutting off the music and placing the on the desk. “Fortunately, I have been studying your work. I knew at once what was wrong and took the only way left to combat the deadly power of the new substance.”

“Which was far more than I, or, for that matter, any medical man could have known. In fact, I had given up hope!” declared Doctor Granville. “Tom Swift, you owe your life to your father!”

Tom smiled at the senior inventor. "Thanks, Dad!" he murmured.

"Now, young sir," went on the physician, "I prescribe bed! You must do no work for a time. And, you will leave whatever caused your illness strictly alone in the future!"

"I guess I will have to knock off for a while," agreed the youth, "since I feel too weak to do much. But I cannot stop work on the blue powder. It's too important!"

Koku assisted his master to the car and the two Swifts drove away to their home. The doctor gloomily shook his head over Tom's refusal to abandon his dangerous experiments.

"Well, son," said Barton Swift, as they rode along. "If you won't heed the doctor, at least I want you to promise me that you'll be more careful in the future. I couldn't get along without you, you know!"

"I WAS careless," admitted Tom, "but from now on, I'll watch my step. But, Dad, I don't understand how you brought me around!"

"I'll tell you. I knew that your nee substance-"

"Which is going to be called 'BARTANTalum' in your honor!"

"Bartantum, then!" Mr. Swift appeared very much pleased, "This has a powerful attraction for sound. So, I said to myself, if a large quantity of Bartantum will attract sounds, why should a very loud sound attract a small amount of the substance? I tried this, using the radio, and it worked. If you examine the loudspeaker, I am confident that you will find it coated with a fine blue powder, drawn from your hands!" he concluded as the two reached home.

Later in the day, after a nap in his own bed, Tom found himself feeling practically well. He was on the point of going downstairs to get a book from the library when Mrs. Baggert came into the room.

"I'm so glad you are better, Tom," she said. "I have something to ask you, but I didn't want to bother you when you weren't well."

"Go ahead," smiled Tom, thinking she was troubled about some trifling matter. "I'll be glad to help you."

"That's just the trouble!" she exclaimed. "You've sent me help I don't need!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand-" began the inventor, somewhat puzzled.

"Why, a young woman came here a while ago with a note from you asking me to give her some work, as she needed it badly. She was to help with the spring-cleaning, it said, as if that wasn't done ago! She's a hard-looking blonde and, if I do say it, not the kind-"

"But, Mrs. Baggert, I wrote you no note and certainly I never interfere with the way you run the house! Have you the note still?"

The housekeeper thrust a hand into her apron pocket and took out a folded paper, which she handed to Tom.

"This is a forgery!" he cried, after one glance. "A pretty good one, though."

“It certainly fooled me!” declared Mrs. Baggert. “But I’ll soon settle that woman. The idea!”

She hustled from the room, while Tom continued slowly to the library, wondering about the episode. It was very strange, to say the least. In a few moments the housekeeper returned, very much excited.

“That- that woman is gone,” she announced. “She didn’t do a bit of work. I thought she was no good. Now what could she have wanted?”

When Tom reached the cozy book-lined library the mystery was solved. As he looked toward the mantel to see what time it was, he saw that his rare and valuable birthday clock was gone!

CHAPTER VIII. THE THREATENING LETTER

“That woman!” Tom cried. “She came here with false references to rob us!”

“Oh!” shrieked Mrs. Baggert, who felt responsible for the theft. At a loss for further words she was glad to hear the doorbell ring. She hurried to let in Ned Newton.

“Well!” he smiled when he saw Tom. “You must be better.”

“Yes, I’m all right now. But come in! We’ve been robbed!”

“What!”

“Yes, my fine clock, the one the men gave me on my birthday, has vanished!” The inventor rapidly told his chum what he suspected.

“Hum, that does look funny,” frowned Ned. When Mrs. Baggert gave a description of the woman, he said, “I’ll bet she was the same blonde who was in the car that followed me the other day.”

“The clock ought to be easy to trace,” said Ned, “if she sells it to some second-hand dealer.”

“That’s just the point,” replied Tom. “I have an idea it wasn’t stolen for reasons of money. Otherwise the woman would have taken more articles, and smaller ones.”

“It seems pretty far-fetched to connect the robbery with the Purple Shirts, even though we suspect the driver of that yellow car was the man who called on you, Tom,” said Ned. “If they’re interested in overthrowing a government and buying silent air-planes for their work, of what use would an antique clock be?”

“I couldn’t possibly answer that.”

“This is a case for the police, Tom,” Ned declared grimly. “That woman should be caught as soon as possible. I’ll phone the detective bureau at once!”

He lost no time in getting in touch with a private firm which was retained to act for the Swift Construction Company on a yearly basis. The agency promised to send one of their best operatives and lived up to this. Within an hour Detective Bright arrived. He was a keen, shrewd-looking young man.

“Please describe clock, Mr. Swift!” was his greeting when he came into the library where the boys were waiting.

“It was of decidedly foreign make and workmanship,” the inventor replied. “Very handsomely carved. But wait, there is a document which came with it, giving its history. I have it here in drawer. I haven't had time to look it over carefully yet.”

“Good. May be a clue there!” jerked the investigator, who seemed never to use anything but staccato phrases.

Tom unfolded the paper and laid it flat on the library table. The three crowded around and commenced reading it.

“Gonzo!” exclaimed Ned, glancing over the page. “Look, Tom, the clock is of ancient Ruthenian origin and it says here that it belonged to the famous general, Carlo Gonzo. He must be an ancestor of Pedro Gonzo, the man who tried to get you to invent something for his government.

“Ha! There is a clue, then!” barked the detective. “How did you get the clock?”

After all the facts of the case, as known to the boys, were made clear to Mr. Bright, he left saying he had other investigations to make.

Next morning found the inventor his usual self once more, the effects of the Bartantalum entirely gone. He went to his office early and through a microscope found particles of blue powder on the radio loudspeaker.

The young scientist devoted most of the morning on another experiment. This time he was going to combine his two latest inventions. Warned by his recent experience, he was extremely careful in handling the blue powder which was to play a part in the test.

“I'm going to 'kill two birds with one shot,' Ned,” he told the business manager when his work was completed. “Mr. Damon is ready to have his orchard sprayed, so I've charged the bomb with an insecticide. At the same time I shall find out if Bartantalum will reduce the noise of the explosion. I have great hopes for that.”

“When are you going to try it?”

“Right now. Want to come along? I'm going to phone Mr. Damon and invite him to watch.”

“Thanks, but I have too much work staring me in the face,” said Ned. “Good luck!”

And good luck is just what Tom Swift had. To his satisfaction the liquid was distributed evenly over the peach trees and the blue powder rendered the discharge of the bomb almost inaudible.

“Bless my firecrackers!” ejaculated Mr. Damon after the test was over. “I never would have believed it! Tom, you are a genius!”

“I don't know about that,” said the inventor. “But I am delighted with the experiment.”

Excited and pleased, young Swift hurried back to the Shopton plant to continue writing out formulas and working on the airplane silencer. Reaching his laboratory, he ordered sandwiches and milk brought. Then

he left instructions that under no circumstances should he be disturbed.

“Now for some work,” he thought.

First he ground to a powder a quantity of the Bartantalum and placed it in the electric smelting furnace. While the apparatus was heating, Tom rigged up a moving-picture camera and focused it through the quartz window upon the melting sub-stance. Then he settled down to a long vigil.

“I must learn why the power plant was put out of commission the last time I broke down the ore!” he declared peering through the window in front of which he had arranged also a tiny, powerful spotlight and a number of lenses to aid his vision. “If I don't solve that-well, it will be practically impossible to make Bartantalum on a large scale!”

The long, silent hours dragged by, the big laboratory in darkness save for the intense beam of white light projected into the furnace. Midnight came and went unnoticed by the intent young experimenter, who was keenly noting every change, however slight, that took place in the fiery mass in the smelter. Suddenly a green light leaped up.

“That's it!” exclaimed Tom Swift, noting how crazily the pointer of the voltmeter behaved. “When the flame appears is the time to be careful,” he added, shutting off the power. “Another instant and there would have been a burn-out in the power plant!”

The metal by no means was reduced yet to the desired form. Tom had to keep adjusting the temperature as the little flame danced over the crucible; too high a heat meant trouble; too low, and the chemical process would stop. It was a delicate, nerve-straining job.

“I must invent an automatic control,” he thought wearily after two hours of watching.

Almost overcome with drowsiness he let his eyelids slowly close. Finally he went sound asleep. Thus it was that he did not notice a thin film of smoke which began to curl beneath the door, leading to the corridor. It was some little time before he awoke, choking.

“What is it?” he thought.

In an instant he knew. Jumping up, he rushed into the hall, only to be met by a heavy volume of smoke which seemed to be coming from his office. His precious papers! He had left them all on top of his desk.

“The automatic sprinkler!” he thought. “It will turn on pretty soon. It may keep the papers from burning up but the water will ruin my whole experiment here. An icy bath on that smelter will mean the end of everything!”

Quickly he turned off the sprinkler control in his laboratory, so the water would drain from the overhead pipes. Putting his coat over his head, he dashed from the room. The self-locking door slammed shut behind him. He was trapped!

CHAPTER IX. A DANGEROUS TEST

Holding his breath until he was ready to burst, Tom made his way by instinct toward an outer door. Before he could reach it, he was forced to fill his lungs with the heavy smoke. Able to hold out no longer, he fell to the floor.

“Mr. Swift! Mr. Swift!” the young inventor heard in the distance as he lost consciousness.

To him it seemed an eternity, but in reality it was only a few seconds before one of the firemen of the plant had picked up his stricken employer and carried him outside the building.

“Are you all right?” he asked as Tom opened his eyes.

“Y-Yes,” came the halting reply.

Tom realized that a lot of activity was going on about him.

“Is the fire a bad one?” he asked the man who still stood by him.

“Mostly smoke,” came the reply. “If you're feeling O. K., I'll go help the others.”

There was no need for this, for at that moment the chief came up with a welcome announcement.

“Mr. Swift,” he said, “the fire is out!”

“That's good news!” said the young scientist. “Did it cause much damage?”

“No, I'm glad to say. Your sprinkler system held the flames in check until we could rig our hoses.”

“What caused the blaze, do you think?” asked Tom.

“This!” The uniformed fire-fighter held up a blackened wire in his gloved hand. “A short-circuit in the wall.”

In a little while the corridors and rooms were entirely free of smoke. Tom, now able to make an inspection, was relieved to find that the damage amounted to little. His latest experiments were unharmed, a fact which induced him to go home and get some sleep.

Since he had been under a constant, heavy strain for some time lately he allowed himself to be persuaded by Ned Newton the next morning to take the day off. The two went down to Lake Carlopa for a motorboat cruise.

“You ought To do this more often,” Ned told him that evening, as they made their craft fast to the pier. “You work entirely too hard!”

“It was fun, all right,” admitted the inventor. “And do you know I got a couple of good ideas while we were out there! If the Bartantulum were fused with rubber and aluminum it would be much more efficient.”

“Oh, you're hopeless!” chuckled his business manager. “Can't you EVER get your mind off your experiments?”

“By the way,” said Tom. “I'd like to phone home.”

As he went toward a booth, he noticed someone inside. Then he was startled to hear the person say, “This is Rumble, Mr. Damon. I'm calling to tell you I have to make a little business trip out of town. I

won't be back for a few days.”

The man dashed from the booth without noticing Tom, who at once put money into the phone and dialed his home. Receiving a busy signal, he decided not to wait and sought out Ned.

“Take a look over there at that man who is just driving off in the black sedan,” Tom said to his chum. “He's Mr. Damon's caretaker, Rumble. I heard him say-”

“Mr. Damon's caretaker?” Ned interrupted excitedly. “He's more than that- Why, that man's the one who followed me in a yellow car that time I told you about. He had the blonde woman with him.”

“Then he's probably the thief's accomplice!” cried Tom, equally perturbed. “Come on, let's catch him!”

Capture was out of the question, however. Before the boys could get to their own auto, Rumble had disappeared. Though his pursuers tried for some time to trace him, they had no luck.

“We'll warn Mr. Damon anyway,” said Tom.

This he did, then for two days young Swift plunged into concentrated work. Finally he came smiling to Ned announcing he had something to demonstrate.

“I've asked Dad to come,” he told his chum.

When his father arrived Tom took the two to his laboratory and showed them a thin disk some twelve inches in diameter, made of an unfamiliar- looking substance.

“This is an alloy of Bartantulum, rubber and aluminum,” Tom explained. “Now, watch and listen!”

He turned on a phonograph, which began blaring forth the strains of a lively march. When he suspended the disk near it, the sounds of the music faded to a mere whisper instantly.

“Amazing!” cried Barton Swift, “I never dreamed you had made such an efficient sound-absorber. Congratulations, my boy!”

“Thanks, Dad. But I'll show you it can take even louder noises an hush 'em up!”

Thereupon he reduced the noise of a large steel drill.

“This is great!” exclaimed Ned, visions of increased bank account for the company in his mind. “There'll be a great demand for this stuff. Riveting machines, boiler factories; in fact, almost any sort of work can be done now in quiet! But what's the next step?”

For answer he was shown a large, partially finished cylinder of the new alloy, shaped somewhat like a bullet.

“This is the magnetic silencer for airplanes,” said Tom. “The rod here will hold it on top of the ship.”

Shortly after lunch the silencer was taken over to Tom's private flying field. There he attached it to one of his larger planes which ordinarily flew with an almost deafening noise.

“If this sound magnet works in this test,” said the inventor, ready to climb in, “it will surely work on

anything!”

“Wait a minute!” called Ned, “Here comes somebody running!”

Somewhat annoyed, Tom turned to see a man hurrying across the grass, waving something.

“Special delivery letter, Mr. Swift!” he panted, handing the inventor an envelope. “It's from the government, so I thought you'd want it at once! I ran all the way.”

“Thanks,” murmured the scientist, opening the letter. Suddenly he frowned.

“Bad news, Tom?” asked father dubiously.

“I'll say it is. The War Department has notified me that another inventor has perfected a silencer and they're about to buy his patent.”

“Well, Tom I shouldn't worry too much,” advised Ned. “I'm sure your invention is better than this other fellow's-no matter what they say.”

Nice of you to think so,” replied the inventor, looking tired and somewhat discouraged. “Why, I'm not even sure my idea will work in a plane.”

Try it, my boy, try it!” urged Mr. Damon, who had just arrived.

“I will!” decided Tom, infected by his friends enthusiasm. “Stand by the audio locator and see if you can pick up anything.”

As the plane shot up only a faint hum sounded. In a few seconds even this died away. When the ship reached the five hundred foot level not even the locator with its big horns and electric amplifiers, could detect a trace of noise. It was weird, thought Ned, to see the powerful ship cruising overhead so silently, like a ghostly bat.

“Tom has certainly succeeded!” declared his father proudly. “The boy has made-”

“Sumpin's wrong wid de plane!” screeched old Eradicate Sampson. “It's a-burnin' up!”

At this the others looked up from the listening device. The ship was very high now, but plainly they could see black smoke pouring from it. Then a figure leaped out and began falling.

“Massa Tom done jumped!” moaned Rad. “He gwine be killed!”

CHAPTER X. TRIUMPH

“No, no!” cried Mr. Swift. “He has a parachute. Oh, I hope it doesn't fail him!”

“The 'chute has opened!” Ned yelled, much relieved. “Tom is safe now!”

He had scarcely spoken when new danger loomed. The burning plane suddenly exploded and the flaming wreckage plunged earthward. For an agonizing moment it seemed as if the fiery mass must surely strike the parachutist. It missed by a scant margin, so Tom was able to float down safely.

“How did my magnetic silencer work?” was his first question, as he came toward them.

“Thank goodness you escaped!” exclaimed Barton Swift. “Your device worked perfectly; we could not pick up a sound.”

“It’s a wonderful thing!” burst out Mr. Damon. “Even though your fine ship is a total loss!” The eccentric man looked toward the smoking remains which had crashed some hundred yards away.

“Bless my insurance policy, what caused the trouble?”

“The Bartantulum affected the ignition system in some strange way, just as it did the power plant circuits,” said the inventor, rather listlessly. “I could remedy that easily, but there’s no use trying, now that the government has a plane-silencer.”

“But, Tom!” cried Ned. “That’s not final yet. You still have a chance! Why not call the War Department right now and ask them for more time?”

“It’s no use, I tell you!” Tom Swift walked slowly away toward the hangar.

Without a word to anyone Ned Newton, life-long chum and admirer of the saddened inventor, caught an evening train for Washington. From the special delivery letter he had learned that the rival silencer was to be tested the next day. Through acquaintance with government officials he managed to get a pass to the army flying field where the demonstration was to be held.

“This Smathers may have a silencer,” he muttered, watching the inventor bustling about the next morning, “but I’ll bet it’s not nearly as good as Tom’s!”

A little later, however, when the fast pursuit ship was over the field and the test in progress, he became dismayed. The man working the radio locator reported to the delighted officers that he couldn’t pick up a sound. Then suddenly Ned looked critically at the sound detector; he became hopeful for Tom.

“That’s an old type locator!” he objected. “Perhaps a modern one, such as an enemy force surely would have, could pick up the plane!”

“Lieutenant James, are we using old-style equipment?” briskly asked a gray-haired officer in charge.

The young soldier hesitated, then said there was no modern locator at the field.

“Then get one!” ordered his superior. “This test must be thorough!”

When the new instrument was brought, a different story was told. With it the operator could easily hear the Smathers’ plane.

“Tom Swift has a better invention!” declared Ned, speaking to the army men, some of whom looked doubtful.

A Colonel Brooks, who had the final say, told the delighted business manager from Shopton that the decision would be postponed and that Tom Swift would be given a chance to demonstrate his device.

“And now for a hasty lunch before I hop home,” said Ned, smiling to himself.

Entering a restaurant near the airport, he was amazed to see three men deep in conversation in a little alcove. Fortunately they did not notice Ned, who recognized them at once. Quickly he took a seat as near them as possible but out of sight.

“Rumble!” he murmured. “And Gonzo! The other man-I have it!” he thought excitedly. “He’s the blonde woman. I’d know that face anywhere. So he dressed up like a maid to get into the Swift home-”

Mr. Damon’s erstwhile caretaker began to speak. “Mr. Gonzo?” he said, “the Smathers’ airplane silencer is a great success. I saw it demonstrated myself this morning. Now there are three groups who can buy this; yourself, the United States, and your enemies, The Purple Shirts. As manager for Mr. Smathers, I am authorized to sell to the highest bidder.”

“Ze Purple Shirts?” gasped Pedro Gonzo. “How come you to know about them?”

Rumble coughed importantly. “I-eh-well, as a matter of fact I have been doing some work for them in this country.”

“Zey are bad,” said Gonzo.

“That’s what we thought,” agreed Rumble. “They asked us to locate a certain clock for them. We did, paying a very large sum for it. We have not delivered it yet, for we find it once belonged to your family. Would you-er- care-to buy it?”

“My family-zey would be overjoy. Many years ago it was stolen-”

Ned waited to hear no more. Hurrying from the room he rushed to a phone booth in the hall and got in touch with F.B.I Headquarters. Quickly he explained his need for speedy assistance. * * * * *

“Well, Mr. Tom, she does all right!” declared Mr. Jackson.

“I agree!” The inventor smiled triumphantly “The motor has been running nearly four hours now without one hitch. Thanks to Ned, we’re still in the race!”

Galvanized into action by his friend’s wire from Washington, Tom Swift had made another Bartantalum “cigar” and mounted it on an airplane. This time he shielded his invention with pipes kept very cold by means of liquid sulphur dioxide, in order to protect the apparatus from heat.

“It’s only when the blue stuff gets hot,” he said to the chief engineer, “as in the smelter or near a red-hot engine that it affects electrical circuits.”

Tom returned to his office, leaving Jackson on watch. He had just sat down behind his desk when in rushed his business manager, much excited.

“I got ‘em!” Ned cried. “Locked in jail!”

“Hey, take it easy!” protested Tom. “What are you raving about? Who is in jail?”

Collecting himself by an effort, Ned told his chum as calmly as he could what had transpired in Washington.

“Gee, Ned, you're the best pal fellow ever had,” replied Tom, deeply affected by the news. “Say,” he added to cover his embarrassment, “I just thought of a reason why Rumble wanted to be at Mr. Damon's farm.”

“To keep track of you and your experiments out there,” supplied Ned.

“Partly,” agreed Tom. “But how about the lonely spot being a wonderful place in which to hide stolen goods?”

“I get your idea,” replied Ned. “Let's hurry out there!”

Together the chums raced along the country roads in Tom's roadster, quickly reaching the farm. After what appeared to be a thorough search they were ready to go home, beaten. Suddenly Tom gave a cry.

“There's a loose board in the floor!”

Excited, he pried this up with a knife. Hidden in the space thus exposed was the wonderful antique clock, wrapped loosely in old newspapers. Near it lay the papers rifled from Mr. Damon's wallet.

“I suppose I'll have to turn this clock over to Pedro Gonzo,” said Tom, and at once called the man by long distance. As soon as he finished his conversation, the young inventor turned happily to his chum. “Gonzo insists I retain the clock as a little token of appreciation from the ruling family of Ruthenia. He says that we kept his government from paying a lot of money to those two scoundrels, Rumble and Blondie. In order to get ahead of the Purple Shirts, he was just about to offer them a huge sum for a worthless invention. You know of course that Smathers gave them no authority to represent him. Well, Ned, you get all the credit.”

With a blush the business manager mumbled he hadn't done any more than he should have. Then he added, “Tom, it's time to start for Washington to keep your appointment for a demonstration of your wonderful silencer.”

This time young Swift had no difficulty in demonstrating his remarkable invention. To the critical examining board he showed that even the most sensitive audio locator could not pick up a sound from a plane equipped with his device, even when flying comparatively low. The officers were so impressed that they cheered the young inventor again and again after he had completed the tests.

“You have made a very great contribution to your country's defenses, Mr. Swift!” declared Colonel Brooks, after formally accepting the use of the magnetic silencer on behalf of the United States.

“In war or peace the invention will prove a blessing,” said Barton Swift, looking proudly at his son. The End

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